

Third Sunday in Lent

Glen Bengson

RCL: Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42 LM: Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42 or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42

Today's reading from the book of Exodus takes us back into the wilderness with Israel, as they complain about their difficult conditions and wonder if they were better off under bondage in Egypt. What a contrast to their earlier cries for deliverance! Is this reminiscent of our own culture, in which every improvement in living conditions apparently leaves people no happier than before? How quickly they forget, we often say, of our selective memory. Didn't Israel remember their cry to God (Exodus 2:23-25), which God heard and to which God responded through Moses, leading Israel out of Egypt? I once heard Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer tell of visiting Calcutta and his angry reaction to the abysmal poverty and hunger he saw in that city of millions. "I wanted to scream at God and shout, 'How can you tolerate such suffering?'" And then it hit me. In the suffering of the poor, God was shouting at me, and for that matter, at all of us and our social systems that cause and perpetuate hunger, poverty, and inequality." If we listen at all, we can still hear the cries of the people, the cry of God.

In the Exodus text, the people "thirsted for water." In John's Gospel Jesus meets a woman at the well. She is intrigued by his offer of "living water" and the prospect of never again being thirsty. People around the world long for that reality, and not only in a spiritual sense. Church World Service/CROP Walks have an ongoing theme, "We walk, because they walk." This links the ten-kilometer length of the CROP Walk to the laborious, daily walk that many people around the world take to bring home fresh water for that day's needs for cooking, drinking, and washing.

Many denominational relief and development agencies provide resources to dig wells to provide fresh water, develop ponds for local fish-raising industries, clean up polluted water, or teach sustainable agricultural methods that conserve and make the best use of local natural resources. In such ways "living water" can become a reality for more people and enhance their lives.

The Samaritan at the well is a person of another culture and religion, a foreigner, a stranger. She is a woman. All these identities presented problems in Jesus' world, and still do in ours. Our nation struggles to welcome immigrants, who often come with few resources except their exceptional determination and innate skills and who meet suspicion and prejudice simply because they are different. They often suffer "guilt by association" because of what others do. Jesus offers the "living water" of hope to all people, of deliverance from the oppressive practices that deny people their true dignity, and the assurance that God does not judge on the basis of society's values but "in spirit and in truth."

After experiencing the "living water" of God's "amazing grace," the woman cannot help but share the good news, running to tell others. Bread for the World members tell the good news of God's care for poor and hungry people, inviting others who thirst for hope to be part of a vibrant ministry. Bread for the World members contact their members of Congress, write letters to the editor of their local newspapers, and use Bread for the World Sunday resources to encourage others to become advocates for hungry people. Church denominational gatherings, clergy association meetings, ecumenical

conferences, and community group events become opportunities for personal testimony to the work of Bread for the World.

The Samaritan woman does not know how people will respond, but she has a passion to tell about the good news in her life—and others respond. God promises that “my word . . . shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose” (Isa 55:11). Advocates for poor and hungry people speak with the confidence that comes from knowing they give voice to the concerns of people for whom God cares deeply. U.S. senator Paul Simon often said that in his experience “one letter to a member of Congress on a hunger issue saves a life.”¹ Our personal testimony for those who hunger will not return empty.

Children’s Time

One of the great photographs from the 1930s Depression is of a woman, her face lined with sadness, weariness, worry; head resting in one hand; holding one baby while two young children hide their faces behind each of her shoulders; clothes rough, worn, dirty. She is the very picture of a person at the edge of her world, wondering if tomorrow simply holds more of the same, trying to exist day to day. Her image sparked a national reaction to provide aid to migrant workers, but she never benefited at the time, continuing to move from place to place.

Just recently her story was told in the *Smithsonian* magazine (March 2002). In 1975 the photographer located her and interviewed her and her three daughters, now grown with their own families. She was a migrant worker in a “pea-pickers camp,” 32 years old, though she looked much older. She and her daughters had been living on frozen vegetables and birds the children had killed. She had just sold the tires on her car to buy food. They lived, with only a quilt to cover them, under the very bridges John Steinbeck had described in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Somehow they had survived.

How many migrant workers, and others, still languish in such conditions today? How can the Church serve as their voice, advocating for just working conditions, medical attention, and educational opportunities for their children? Find this photo, available as a poster, and simply ask the children what they see, what they feel, when they look at the woman’s picture. Is this how those without food, without home, without hope might look? If you felt like this, what could people do to help you? What can we do to help feed them, house them, offer them work that pays, give them hope? Adults will want to see it, too, and perhaps talk about these things.

1. Quoted in Arthur Simon, *Christian Faith and Public Policy: No Grounds for Divorce* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987) 106.

Musical Suggestions

Son of God, Eternal Savior—LBW 364

Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life—LBW 429 (also BP 174)

In Christ There Is No East or West—LBW 359 (also BP 87)

When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land—WOV 670

For All the Faithful Women—WOV 692

You Satisfy the Hungry Heart (Gift of Finest Wheat)—WOV 711

Here in This Place (Gather Us In)—WOV 718
My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness—WOV 730
I, the Lord of Sea and Sky (Here I Am, Lord)—WOV 752 (also BP 129)
Let Justice Flow like Streams—WOV 763
Banquet of Praise in Justice Spread—BP 79
God of Justice, God of Mercy—BP 86
I've Got Peace Like a River—BP 113
Brothers and Sisters of Mine Are the Hungry—BP 148
Help, O Lord, the Thrown Away—BP 150